Hong Kong

Hong Kong fire death toll rises to 146 as China authorities warn over unrest

Thousands of residents pay tribute near apartment complex destroyed by blaze

Many residents have laid flowers at memorials around Hong Kong, which on Saturday began three days of mourning © AP

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Hong Kong police said more bodies had been recovered from the city's deadliest fire in decades as Chinese authorities warned they would use strict national security laws to respond to any "disruption" after the disaster.

The blaze in the Tai Po district had claimed 146 lives as of Sunday afternoon, police said, with 54 bodies yet to be identified and more than 40 people unaccounted for.

Search operations continued in several burnt-out high-rise towers at Wang Fuk Court, a typical residential complex with apartment blocks more than 30 storeys high, where the fire started on Wednesday.

Man Han Lam, the regional police commander at New Territories North Regional Headquarters, told reporters that clearing and investigating the remaining blocks — described as "the most challenging" — would take another three to four weeks.

Bodies have been found on rooftops, and the entire compound will remain sealed until the police confirm its structural safety.

Hong Kong began a three-day period of mourning on Saturday, with all official festivities cancelled. Thousands of residents laid flowers and paid tributes at makeshift memorials over the weekend.

Authorities have so far arrested 11 people in connection with their investigation into the fire. The housing estate was under renovation at the time of the blaze and authorities are examining safety standards and the materials used in the project.

As the investigation continues, authorities have moved quickly to contain wider fallout from the deadly event. High-casualty fires and any suggestion of links to corruption remain politically sensitive issues for both local and central governments.

The South China Morning Post reported on Saturday that Hong Kong's national security police had detained a man on suspicion of inciting sedition in relation to the fire. Police did not confirm the arrest but said they would "take actions according to actual circumstances and in accordance with the law".

China's national security authorities in Hong Kong on Saturday warned unspecified "anti-China disrupters" not to use the disaster to "create chaos".

The Office for Safeguarding National Security drew parallels with unrest in 2019, when massive protests engulfed Hong Kong.

"They exploit people's pain and go against public opinion, attempting to use the victims' grief to advance their political ambitions and drag Hong Kong back into the turmoil" of the protests in 2019, the office said.

"We sternly warn the anti-China disrupters who attempt to 'disrupt Hong Kong through disaster'. No matter what methods you use, you will certainly be held accountable and strictly punished under the Hong Kong national security law and the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance."

The disaster is the most serious fire in Hong Kong since 1948, when 176 people perished in a warehouse blaze.

Businesses across the city have announced donations for victims and their families, while Hong Kong's chief executive John Lee pledged that the government would provide temporary housing for all those displaced.

Additional contributions from Cheng Leng in Beijing

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